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opening extract from

Superhumans: Meteorite Strike

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METEORITE STRIKE

Behind them the night lit up a brilliant yellow. A split second later the sound of an explosion assaulted their ears. Through the swirling storm Sarah could see flames rising hundreds of feet into the air.

The plane had blown up.

Burning pieces of metal and debris fell through the air and landed all around. Suddenly, with the fire blazing high into the night, their present shelter didn't seem so safe. Daniel grabbed their arms and led them on into the darkness once more.

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Nicole the air hostess was perfectly lovely: tall, thin and blonde with a calm voice that suggested she'd never raised it in her life. Sarah hated her from the moment they met.

“Hey, is that *Iron Man*? Cool movie.”

“I've seen it twenty times,” Robert replied, holding up the portable DVD player they'd been given for the flight. He seemed unaware of just how annoying Nicole was.

“Great,” Nicole went on, flashing her blue eyes and leaning over Sarah to paw at the machine. “They've

got *Wolverine* on the in-flight movies. You should check it out.”

“We saw it in the cinema.”

“I thought it was way better than the last *X-Men* film...”

Finally snapping, Sarah pushed Robert back a little too roughly, almost causing him to drop the player. He let out a cry of annoyance and the attendant looked at her in surprise.

“I know what you’re doing,” Sarah said flatly, meeting her eyes.

“I’m sorry?”

Sarah sighed loudly. “It’s in your job description to make sure that the kids on your flight are having a *swell time*. Well, we’re fine. So you don’t have to pretend to be interested in what we’re doing or what we have on our iPods.”

“I just wanted to make sure—”

“If we want you, we’ll press the button,” Sarah interrupted, pointing to the panel in the handrest. “You don’t have to keep bothering us.”

Annoyance flashed in the woman’s eyes. Then she put that fake smile back on her face for Robert’s benefit.

“You want anything, just call, okay?” she said to him, talking past Sarah.

“Sure thing, Nicole.”

“*Sure thing, Nicole,*” Sarah mimicked under her breath as the woman walked away up the aisle of the plane. No doubt she was going back to the flight attendants’ cubicle to tell them about the horrible girl in seat 28B. *Well, what do I care what she thinks?* Sarah thought angrily.

“Why were you so mean to her?” Robert asked, looking round with disapproval in his eyes.

“I hate adults like that. Ones who pretend to like all the same things you do. *Wolverine is cool. Justin is cool.* Yeah, right.”

“I thought she was nice,” Robert said, looking down at the player again. A lock of blond hair fell across his face and he brushed it out of his eyes with the back of his hand, just like Mum used to do with hers.

Sarah put her face close to his so she could make her point.

“She’s paid to be nice, idiot.”

Robert said nothing. He just put the headphones in his ears and started the movie again without even looking at her. Conversation over. He’d been doing that a lot recently. Sticking his face in the DVD player, the Nintendo or one of the other expensive toys he’d been bought whenever things got too difficult. Like things with Mum. Sarah knew from experience that he wouldn’t

even try to talk for another hour. *Fine*. She didn't want to hear how great Nicole was again, anyway.

"What are you two bickering about?"

Bickering? Eyebrows raised, Sarah looked across the aisle at the person who'd spoken.

"Bickering, Daniel?" she asked. "Just who says *bickering* any more?"

Daniel made a face and stroked a hand through his closely trimmed hair, just like he always did when he was annoyed and trying to hide it. In the month since he'd walked back into their lives, she'd picked up on that particular habit fast.

"I don't know, Sarah," he replied, mimicking her sarcastic tone. "I guess I must have heard it on an old, *old* TV show."

"Was it called *Ten Phrases for Wannabe Dads*, Daniel?" Sarah smirked, pleased with her own cleverness.

His jaw tightened visibly. "No, Sarah. I seem to remember it was called *Annoying Little*—"

Daniel stopped in mid-sentence, clearly with some effort. He placed a sleep mask over his eyes again and pushed his chair into the recline position.

"Wake me up when you're ready to be friendly," he said as he put in a set of earplugs.

Sarah opened her mouth to say something, but realized that it was useless. Both her travelling companions were dead to the world, cocooned in their little bubbles. Worst of all, she was stuck with them: an annoying kid brother and an equally annoying adult. If Mum were there on the plane it would have been okay, they could've talked, but she wasn't...Daniel was.

Daniel, their biological father (or *accidental dad*, as Sarah preferred to think of him), had walked out of their lives eight years before. After that, the most Sarah and Robert received from him every year were birthday and Christmas cards (usually bearing stamps from different parts of the world and containing American dollars that Mum would change at the bank).

Her memories of Daniel as a father were hazy, and for Robert, who was barely two years old when he left them, non-existent. There had been happy times, of course – Sarah remembered trips to the beach or the cinema as a family, before Robert had arrived. But those images were indistinct compared to the last one of Daniel and Mum arguing in the hall. There was a suitcase on the floor. Mum picked it up and threw it at him...

"If that's what you want, just get out, Daniel!"

Sarah often wondered what had really happened, but Mum had always refused to say – just that their dad had

to leave because his work was on the other side of the world. But they'd been happy, hadn't they? She'd blamed Mum for a long time after Daniel left. Then she became angry at him. Then she didn't feel anything at all.

It was only when Mum became sick that Daniel returned – appearing off a long-haul flight from Australia four weeks before. Since then he'd been hanging around on the sidelines, having hushed conversations with Mum and the doctors when they all thought she wasn't listening. Sarah knew what the discussions were about, of course: what to do with them after Mum died.

Now, they were left with him...

Trying to tear her mind away from those thoughts, Sarah turned her attention to her television screen. Using the handset, she flipped to the flight progress channel. A misshapen white blob representing their plane was crossing a map of the world from England on the way to Australia. They'd already stopped in Hong Kong on the first part of the journey, which had taken almost thirteen hours. The map zoomed in and Sarah could see that they were now passing over the north-western part of Australia.

Almost two hours before, she and Robert had become excited when the map had finally shown the plane over

Australia. But looking out the window they'd only seen a lot of blackness. It was three in the morning local time, after all. For ages after that, there seemed to be no progress on the map whatsoever. Sarah was beginning to get the idea of just how big the country was when she looked at the remaining flight time. Their destination was Melbourne, in the south-east of the country, and there were still a few hours to go until they touched down there.

After a while Sarah gave up trying to see if the plane on the screen had moved. She was bored and there was nothing on the in-flight programme that she wanted to see. And fat chance of getting the DVD player away from Robert while he was watching *Iron Man* and in a sulk. She couldn't sleep either. Although her eyelids felt heavy, the constant hum of the engines kept her awake. This second part of the trip was starting to seem even longer than the first, she thought with a sigh.

Finally she decided to stretch her legs to relieve the boredom.

Pulling one of the headphones out of Robert's ear, she said, "I'm going for a walk. Don't get into trouble or Nicole will be very angry."

He stuck the headphone back and ignored her. Across the aisle, Daniel's head lolled against the side of his

chair and he gave a low snore. Sarah shook her head at both of them and pushed herself up. Her legs felt stiff and she couldn't remember a time when she'd sat still for so long.

The lights of the cabin had been dimmed, creating a night-time effect to help the passengers sleep. Walking towards the middle of the plane Sarah had to be careful not to trip on people's feet sticking into the aisle. Most were sprawled in their chairs, some wearing eye masks and earplugs like Daniel, many of them snoring. At the other end of the cabin a baby was crying softly.

She stopped by the emergency exit and looked out of the window, hoping to see something out in the darkness. There was nothing. *Very exciting.*

It reminded her of sitting on the edge of Mum's bed in the hospital and being made to look at the Australia guidebook one of the nurses had brought in for them. Mum trying to tell her what an adventure it would be. Listing all the strange animals they only have in Australia. How in the outback you can go for hundreds of kilometres without passing through a town.

"It sounds boring," Sarah had said, looking away. "I'm not going."

"Sarah, please," Mum replied, putting a hand on her arm. "For Robert..."

He'd been sitting in the corner, plugged into a game on the Nintendo. If he could hear their conversation, he didn't show it.

"Everything I like is here. All my friends. School. Why is this happening?" Then she'd thrown her arms around Mum to hide the tears welling in her eyes.

"You've got to be strong for your brother," Mum whispered back. "I'm not going to be here much longer. Daniel...your dad is going to look after you. He wants to do the right thing this time..."

"And you believe that? He didn't want to eight years ago – not when his job was more important than us. Not when he wanted to follow it around the world and leave us behind."

"I've spoken to him and he's changed," Mum replied, taking her hand. "He's more...settled now. He's got a steady job and bought a house in Melbourne – somewhere you can all call home. I want you all to have a new start in Australia and so does Daniel, but he's going to need a lot of help."

"What about Monica?" Sarah protested. "Why can't we live with her?" Monica was Mum's boss and best friend. She had a big house in the city and a dog and Sarah got on well with her kids – well, most of the time...

“Monica has her own family to take care of,” Mum said firmly. “We’ve been through this before. Daniel’s your real dad and—”

“Beggars can’t be choosers, right?” Sarah interrupted bitterly.

Mum sighed. “He wants another chance. Can you give him that, Sarah? For me?”

Sarah looked away, refusing to answer her mother for a long time.

“I’ll help with Robert,” she said finally, when it became clear Mum was prepared to wait all afternoon for an answer. “But I won’t call him dad – ever. He’ll just be a guy we’re staying with until we’re old enough to look after ourselves. That’s the best I can do, okay?”

“Okay.”

For a moment in the plane Sarah actually thought she might start crying again and quickly rubbed her eyes, worried that Nicole might come along and see her upset. The last thing she needed was more sympathy from a stranger. Nicole; the nurses at the hospital; Daniel; why couldn’t they just mind their own business?

To clear her head, Sarah went through some of her warm-up exercises from the karate classes she’d been taking for the last two years. In the cramped space she even tried a few attacking stances to stretch her legs.

She would have attempted a couple of kicks but she was worried about hitting one of the chairs.

After five minutes she felt pleasantly out of breath and much more energized. Sarah leaned against the wall next to the stewards' station, a little cubicle where they all sat with the curtain drawn. The sound of a conversation reached her ears and before she knew it, she was listening in. The tones were hushed and unmistakably anxious.

"...we going to have to turn back?" a male voice asked.

"Pete says that we should be okay," replied a woman Sarah recognized as Nicole. "But there's a cloud of dust the size of a city being blown to the south."

"What the hell will happen if we fly into it...?"

"They think it's going to bypass Melbourne. We can go around..."

"What about the airport? Sounds like it's going to be chaos..."

"And the news? Passengers will be seeing it on the in-flight TV when they wake up..."

Interested, Sarah moved a little closer, accidentally knocking the thin wall with her foot as she did so. The voices stopped. She stepped back as the curtain was drawn open.

“Anything wrong?” asked Nicole, calm as ever.

“I...I want a drink. Please.”

Nicole looked back at the group huddled in the cubicle. Even in the dim light Sarah could see that the male attendant was white as a sheet.

“I’ll bring it to you in a minute, Sarah. Go back to your seat, please.”

“Is there something...”

“Go back to your seat.”

Sarah turned and walked slowly back down the aisle, aware of Nicole watching as she went.

She found Robert asleep with the DVD still playing. As gently as possible, she pulled the headphones from his ears and turned off the machine to save the battery. Then she started flicking through the in-flight TV to find a news channel. It didn’t take long before she’d found what had worried Nicole and the others so much.

An American station was showing satellite footage of what looked like a cloud passing through the centre of Australia. Based on her knowledge of the size of the place, Sarah could see that it must be huge. A headline running across the bottom of the screen read:

*BREAKING NEWS: METEORITE HITS CENTRAL
AUSTRALIA. EMERGENCY SERVICES ON*

*HIGH ALERT. HUNDRED-KILOMETRE-WIDE
DUST CLOUD SPREADING.*

Sarah's mouth went dry. They were flying straight towards it.